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## Dominant Discourse in Literature and Popular Music

**Título:** Dominant Discourse in Literature and Popular Music. **Target:** Profesores/Estudiantes de Inglés. **Asignatura:** Literatura Inglesa. **Autor:** Aina March Escoto, Licenciada en Filología Inglesa.

Most of the popular music available nowadays contributes to the reproduction of dominant discourse by reinforcing the image of women as submissive, silenced and dependant on men. This paper analyzes female voices in music with the aim to explore how dominant discourse is embedded within us and how it is constantly reproduced. The aim of the analysis is to deconstruct the song “Because you loved me” by Celine Dion in order to reach the patriarchal messages which are hidden behind the lyrics. In order to do so, a resistant reading will be followed. This will be related to the analysis of female literary characters and new voices in music.

Celine Dion's "Because You Loved Me" was first released in 1996. The main idea the song conveys is that a woman is not a fulfilled human being until she finds a man who loves her and takes care of her. The man is portrayed as a savior for the woman, whose life did not have a meaning without him. The song gives an image of women that fits into the idea of the Angel in the House, which was originally the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1984. In this poem he described a faultless wife as understanding, supportive, polite, courteous, sacrificed and pure. This definition has come to label the social and moral pattern of Victorian women in the nineteenth century (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 344). This conception of femininity as synonym with passivity, submission and servitude was proper of Victorian times and the idea still held by both men and women nowadays. This happens because this is the message that the patriarchal order transmits. Dominant discourse is reproduced from generation to generation, and it remains embedded in people without them being aware of it. Therefore, an analysis of the means through which the patriarchal messages are reproduced is necessary. Popular music is an example of this, since it can act as sort of satellite which constantly transmits patriarchal messages to the society.

The chorus of "Because you loved me" clearly reinforces the image of the woman as a submissive Angel in the House, since she is seen as a weak, voiceless and blind character:

"You were my strength when I was weak,  
You were my voice when I couldn't speak,  
You were my eyes when I couldn't see,  
You saw the best there was in me,  
Lifted me up when I couldn't reach,  
You gave me faith because you believed.  
I am everything I am because you loved me"  
(Dion 1996)

The chorus is normally the most appealing and powerful part of a song because of its reiteration. Because of its repetitions, listeners can retain the information given in the chorus easily and reproduce it in the future. Feminist Rosi Braidotti affirmed that through repetitions, new spaces for women can be opened. Therefore, if the chorus is repeated many times, it can reach a point when it becomes ironic. Then, the established roles of women can be deconstructed, creating new spaces for the expression of the female voice.

In this song the female subject is defined only in relation to the male counterpart: "I am everything I am because you loved me". This can be related to the Lacanian ideas of a woman being a void without a man that can help to define her and lead her way into the symbolic order. Jacques Lacan affirmed that "woman does not exist" and that "woman is not whole" because she lacks the phallus (Lechte: 1994). Thus the woman is a negative of the man. Luce Irigaray in "When Our Lips Speak Together" opposed to this position and affirmed that "we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That has always already happened, without their efforts" (1985:212). Thus she proposed to change the way women have been perceived in the course of history.

In the song by Celine Dion the main topic is a man-woman relationship and therefore there are many references to love. Irigaray questions the words “I love you” and claims that when one says “I love you”, dominant discourse is also being reproduced. Irigaray affirms that women cannot convey their inner feelings differently because men have left women only lacks (1985: 206-7). Thus a change in the expression of women’s feelings is needed. In the song, the phrase “because you loved me” is in the past tense. This implies that the man loved the woman in the past but not anymore. Still, the woman thanks him for “all the truth” that he made her see and for “all the wrong” that he “made right”. Here, the message is that before knowing him, the woman was blind, lost and wrong. Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” affirmed that “a woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being a servant of the militant male, his shadow” (1975: 880). Cixous’s position here is that this woman must be “killed” because it prevents the real one from living.

This can be related to the character of Susan in “To Room Nineteen”, a short story by Doris Lessing first published in 1973. Susan believed that her family was all she needed in order to be fulfilled. This is the message that the patriarchal order has sent through generations: a woman must take care of the family in order to be satisfied. Susan yielded to be the hostess of the house. After Matthew had confessed he had been unfaithful, Susan tried to convince herself that extra-marital affairs were not important. However, Matthew’s infidelity triggered a process to self-discovery for Susan. She embarked on a journey in which her constructed identity would be “killed”, as Cixous proposed, in order to find her real identity.

Susan’s suicide can be related to the patriarchal binary thought. Jacques Derrida argued that in a binary opposition there is always a relation of power since one of the poles has the main authority; it dominates and governs upon the other. Derrida affirmed that there is a violent hierarchy between two binary oppositions and that a peaceful coexistence is basically impossible (Hall 1997: 235-258). This is why Susan tries to escape from this violent hierarchy. Also, Hélène Cixous stated that in a binary opposition the feminine side is always seen as the negative one. Cixous tackles the topic of death within binary oppositions and concludes that a term can only acquire meaning by destroying the other. Cixous argues that this situation does not leave a space for women and affirms that “either woman is passive or she doesn’t exist” (Eagleton 1996: 148). This is why Susan decided to die rather than stay passive. Therefore her death should be seen not as a defeat but as a rebellion against the patriarchal dominance.

Susan’s incapability of expressing her feelings made her remain a voiceless character. Mary Eagleton in “Speech and Silence” dealt with women’s difficulties when it comes to communicating their ideas, both in the public and in the private sphere. She affirmed that “social and cultural pressures undermine their confidence and make them hesitant about speaking” (1996:16). These pressures are obviously a product of the patriarchal order. In this case, Susan was silenced within the private domain, since it was the only space assigned to her: “I’ve got to force myself to say: Yes, but do you realize that I never feel free? [...] But she said: ‘I don’t feel well’” (1978: 356). This led her to try to find the new space she needed, even if the search for a new liberty implied her death.

Luce Irigaray formulated a series of hypothesis about women’s speech that could also be applied to music. Most popular music is about love relationships, and the songs normally offer an image of

women and femininity similar to that found in “Because you loved me”. Following Irigaray’s ideas, if these messages are constantly being reproduced the situation of women will stay the same. She believed that “if we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history” (1985: 205). She proposed to stop reproducing the same history, and change history into her story. In this way Irigaray encourages women to come out of the patriarchal language by creating their own.

Some recent songs already use a different language or a different strategy to portray women. This is the case of the song “Bitch”, by Meredith Brooks. This song was first released in 1997 and it can be seen as an innovative and ironic way of deconstructing the way women are perceived by men. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous affirmed that writing is a way of creating new ways of expression for women. She emphasized the need for women to write since “writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (1975: 879).

Cixous’s theories about writing could also be applied to music, since lyrics could be used as a tool for women to spread messages against male dominance. At the same time, lyrics could also represent a new space where women could express their feelings in order to make others aware of their situation. The song “Bitch” can be considered as an innovative way of expressing women’s feelings since Meredith Brooks does not talk like an Angel in the House would have done. Brooks says that she abhors the way men look at her as if she was “an angel underneath, innocent and sweet” and she expresses herself like an active subject fully aware of her position in society. The chorus of the song says as follows:

“I’m a bitch, I’m a lover,  
I’m a child, I’m a mother,  
I’m a sinner, I’m a saint,  
I do not feel ashamed.  
I’m your hell, I’m your dream,  
I’m nothing in between.  
You know you wouldn’t want it any other way”.  
(Brooks 1997)

In order to convey how she feels, Brooks opposes positive and negative dichotomies that have always been associated with women. With this chorus, Meredith Brooks claims that she does not want to be conceived under those dichotomies and she defies this dualism by saying that she is neither one thing nor the other. This song can be considered as a manifesto of women’s liberty and autonomy, since it deconstructs the idea of women as passive subjects. Therefore, this song is an example of how music can be a new space for the expression for women. The position of Meredith Brooks in the song can be compared to the final attitudes of Susan in “To Room Nineteen”. In the same way that Susan tries to find her real identity, Brooks finds a way of expressing her feelings, challenging patriarchy.

The video of the song is set in a room with a flowered wallpaper and a window that does not offer any view outdoors. Instead, the window shows another wallpaper, which is yellow. This could be

related to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", a short story first published in 1892. This story presents the life of a woman who remains locked in a room struggling against the male dominance. This woman is nameless, which symbolically signals her status in the society of the time. She is constantly infantilized and treated as an inferior by her husband. Her room used to be a nursery, which is also related to her infantilization, and her husband frequently refers to her with epithets such as "blessed little goose" (1997: 102). The video of the song "Bitch" also displays many objects related to femininity and children such as toys, starts, princesses dressed in white. Thus both the short story and the video seem to denounce this infantilization of women and the patronizing attitudes of the husbands towards their wives. These elements of innocence and vulnerability contrast with the fierce attitudes of Meredith Brooks and the protagonist of the short story.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the bed in the protagonist's room is heavy and immovable, which could be understood as a symbol for the heavy social and moral obligations related to women at the time. These obligations were related to household duties and also to women's sexuality, which had to be passive and moderate, representing the Angel in the House. The short story presents, through symbology, a critique against the repression of women's sexuality. The song "Bitch" also holds this position. Nowadays, not only men but also many women criticize others for being sexually active. These women are commonly labeled as "bitches". Hélène Cixous found an explanation for this and affirmed that the patriarchal order has left women with a strong rivalry among themselves. Men have lead women "to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves [...] they have constructed the infamous logic of antilove" (1975: 878). This rivalry is something that should change in order to improve the situation of women. A feeling of sisterhood is needed if women are to change the patriarchal order some day.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper" the narrator is mad because of the social impositions she has to endure. This is against related to Cixous's reflections about women's choices: passivity or self-destruction. In "To Room Nineteen" the only escape for Susan was suicide. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the escape that the narrator takes is madness. Therefore, her madness should not be seen as a defeat but as a rebellion against patriarchal dominance. The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" releases her rage through the wallpaper, which displays the figure of a woman. This woman can be seen as a doppelganger or double of the protagonist. Also, in "To Room Nineteen", the devil that Susan sees in the garden could be her alter ego, whom she is afraid to confront. The device of the double has been widely used in literature written by women, as a means to express their social constraints. Gilbert and Gubar studied the use of this literary device and affirmed that literature written by women often uses this technique in order to show the incongruities between "what they are and what they are supposed to be" in the patriarchal society (2000: 84).

"The Yellow Wallpaper" and "To Room Nineteen" are short stories that can help to deconstruct the idea of women as passive subjects subordinated to men. The protagonists of these short stories try to find a new freedom, a new way of expressing their feelings, challenging patriarchy and male dominance. Meredith Brooks in "Bitch" also employs an striking and innovative way of expressing her thoughts. Neither the song nor the short stories offer a clear solution to finally destroy the patriarchal order. However, they should be considered as symbolic victories of women who have defied the patriarchal authority attempting to come out of the dominant discourse in order to reach women's liberation. ●

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